

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN ELECTIVE POLITICS IN NIGERIA

by

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Fifth Annual
Graduate Student
Paper Competition
1982

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African Studies Program
Indiana University
ISBN: 0-941934-41-1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to the reviewers of the African Studies Program at Indiana University for their helpful comments regarding this paper. I would also like to express my appreciation to the Department of Political Science at Indiana for their generous extension of word processing facilities. The support I received from both of these programs greatly enhanced the quality of this work. As with all publications, the views expressed here are my own, and responsibility for them lies alone with me.

I. Introduction

British colonialism brought with it a major dilemma for the legal, constitutional and political evolution of the Nigerians: How could the contrasting notions of elective representative government be reconciled with the notion of indirect rule, which had as its foundation traditional rulers? Stated differently, what role was the traditional ruler to play in the evolution of elective politics in Nigeria? Should he be given constitutional guarantees that his interests would be represented in parliamentary bodies, or would traditional rulers be required to seek representation through participation in intermediary organizations, such as political parties? Finally, the entire question of traditional rulers participating in elective politics arose: Should their participation be allowed at all, or should their activities be focused more on "a-political" ceremonial activities?

The purpose of this paper is to explore both the constitutional and the political roles that traditional rulers have played in the evolution of Nigerian elective politics. By focusing upon the evolution of elective politics, we can identify three distinct periods: the Early Colonial, which extended from the amalgamation of the North and the South in 1914 until immediately after World War II; the transition to Self-government and Independence, 1944-1966; and finally, after nearly thirteen years of military rule, the Transition to Civilian politics, 1978 to the present. This paper will examine each period in turn and will attempt to answer two questions: A) What were the constitutional and legal provisions that created avenues through which traditional rulers could participate in politics and B)

what effect did the absence or abundance of such avenues have upon the participation of traditional rulers in intermediary organizations?

II. Early Colonial Period

During the Early stages of Nigeria's history, traditional rulers played two distinct roles which were later to serve as the foundations upon which further constitutional and political provisions would be made for their increased participation. At the lowest level of the colonial administrative structures, traditional rulers were included through a policy of indirect rule while at the top level, the Legislative Council, traditional rulers were also included through their participation in early political parties.

A. Traditional Rulers and Early Elective Politics

Electoral politics in Nigeria during the early colonial period existed in only very narrow terms. After the amalgamation of Northern Nigeria with the South, a legislative council was created for the entire country, the Nigerian Council.¹ The unofficial membership included two Emirs from the North, the Alafin of Oyo from the South, as well as one member each from Lagos, Calabar, and the Benin-Warri area.² However, due to its limited legislative competence, the Council failed to attract much interest on the part of either the official or

¹Kalu Ezera. Constitutional Developments in Nigeria (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1964). p. 22.

²Ibid.

the unofficial members.³

In 1920, a delegation from the National Council of British West Africa (NCBWA) went to London to demand, among other things, direct representation on the Nigerian Council. Their demands were openly rejected by both the then Secretary of State, Lord Milner, as well as the Governor of Nigeria, Sir Hugh Clifford. In spite of this opposition to the NCBWA demands, Sir Hugh did initiate the first of what were to be many constitutional reviews. Under the Constitution adopted in 1922, the Clifford Constitution, limited elected representation was introduced, with Lagos returning three members and Calabar returning one. The Emirs from the North were removed as was the Council's competence in that region.⁴

The Clifford Constitution maintained a comfortable official majority on the Council-- 27 out of 46 seats-- however, the introduction of electoral politics did open up new roles for traditional rulers. In Lagos, elections to the Legislative Council, as well as to the Town Council, were dominated by the Nigerian National Democratic Party. The NNDP, founded by Herbert Macaulay, and presided over by Egerton-Shyugle, provided the first opportunity for traditional rulers in the south to participate directly in elective politics. The NNDP encouraged this and indeed built its support out of a coalition of White Cap Chiefs (the traditional landowners in the

³Louis J. Munoz. "Traditional Participation in a Modern Political system-- The Case of Western Nigeria." The Journal of Modern African Studies, vol. 18, #3 (1980). p. 444.

⁴In the North, the Governor governed by decree through his Native Administration. There is no indication that the Alafin of Oyo was retained as a member of the council.

Lagos area). Imams, market women, town elders, and the leaders of traditional societies.⁵ From 1923, until 1938, this coalition based upon traditional rulers fielded all the successful Town and Legislative Council candidates.

B. Rural Administration. Direct, and Indirect Rule.

The most important role for traditional rulers in early colonial Nigeria lay not in the area of elective politics at the national level, but rather in the area of local administration. Nigeria's administrative structures, in theory, were based upon the notion of indirect rule. With the Governor at the head of the administration, the chain of command continued through the Lieutenant Governors in the Provinces, the District Officers in the Divisions, and the Native Authorities in the Native Administration. The Native Authority was the local traditional ruler who alone was charged with the responsibilities of local administration and government within his domain.

The role of the Native Authority was two-fold. First, he was the last link in the colonial administrative chain and it was through him that decisions made at the center were enforced locally. As an agent of the central government, the Native Authority was subordinate to the District Officer and indirect rule was very direct. However, in the area of local government, the role of the Native Authority was changed somewhat. Here, the British established the general

⁵Richard L. Sklar. Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963). p. 47.

guidelines, but left much of the actual policy making up to the individual Native Authorities.⁶ So long as the Native Authority operated within the established boundries, the District Officer functioned as an advisor to him.

In order for a traditional ruler to become a Native Authority, he had to be recognized as such by the Governor. Officially, British policy was to select the senior traditional ruler of an area as the Native Authority.⁷ This process was complicated by the diverse types of traditional rulers in Nigeria. In the North, an aristocratic and autocratic hierarchical system of traditional rule was clearly designated, and the senior traditional rulers-- the Emirs-- could easily be identified. In the south, however, the traditional rulers rarely ruled alone, but rather derived their authority from their position "in council". In the east, political organization was highly decentralized and rarely went beyond the village level. Even at the village level, though, few central traditional rulers existed. Rather, village councils operated which were representative of the major clans in the village. Thus the very act of selecting individual traditional rulers who could then be integrated into central colonial administration interfered with the very notion of the traditional ruler ruling not above society, but rather in it.

In addition to the problem of identification, the problem of succession also arose. In most instances, the selection of a

⁶Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime. "Introduction." West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status Under Colonial Rule and Independence (New York: Africana, 1970). p. vii-xxix.

⁷Lord Frederick J.D. Lugard. The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa (London: Frank Cass, 1965). p. 213.

traditional ruler was a political process which took place between the members of a given community. Political battles were fought and the winner emerged as the traditional ruler. With the integration of traditional rulers into the national administration, the decision of the community ceased to be final. As all Native Authorities had to be confirmed by the Governor, the community in question had to select from amongst those contestants who were acceptable to him. Thus, even without active intervention, the central government indirectly influenced the outcome of the selection process.

Early colonial Nigeria thus provided traditional rulers with two ways in which they could influence politics. At the national level, traditional rulers had lost their legal role in the Legislative Council, however, they did influence it by forming the political base of the only successful political party at the time, the N.N.D.P. At the local level, the legal role of the traditional ruler as a Native Authority was provided for in a clearly prescribed manner. However, the definition of the Native Authority both as a direct member of the central administration as well as an independent local administrator served to alienate him from his most basic power base, his "subjects."⁸

III. The Transition to Self Rule and Independence

Prior to the constitutional reviews which began in 1944,

⁸For a discussion of traditional rulers during the colonial era, see Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime. op. cit.

traditional rulers had played an active role in elective politics in urban areas. At the same time, their rural counterparts were becoming increasingly dependent upon the central government, and increasingly independent of their own communities, for their power and authority. It was upon this rather uncertain base upon which the Constitution of 1944, the Richards constitution. was placed.⁹

A. Traditional Rulers and Constitutional Change

The Richards Constitution 1944-1951

The Richards Constitution sought to bridge the gap between the Native Authorities at the local level and the largely appointed and official Legislative Council at the national level.¹⁰ In order to do this, representation based upon the notion of regionalism was introduced into both the Houses of Assembly as well as the Legislative Council.

⁹Sir Aurthur Richards was the then governor of Nigeria.

¹⁰Sir Aurthur Richards stated his three goals of constitutional reform as: 1)to promote the unity of Nigeria 2)to provide adequately within that desire for the diverse elements which make up the country and 3)to secure greater participation by Africans in the discussion of their own affairs. Nigerian Sessional Paper no. 4, Cmd. 6599 (1945) in Ezera op. cit. p. 67.

At the regional level, the constitution established Houses of Assembly in each of the three regions, as well as a House of Chiefs in the North. Each House of Assembly included both official members, those appointed by the Governor who officially supported him, as well as unofficial members who were selected, for the most part, by the Native Authorities from amongst themselves. In the East, the unofficals numbered 15-18, 10-13 of whom were selected by the Native Authorities and up to five by the Governor.¹¹

The Western and Northern Regions accentuated the role of the Native Authorities and the traditional rulers. In the West, in addition to having 7-11 of the 15-19 unofficial members selected from and by the Native Authorities, the Governor, after consultation with the Chiefs of the Western Provinces, appointed three Head Chiefs to the House. Additionally, the Governor appointed five minority representatives. In the North, a House of Chiefs was created to supplement the House of Assembly. Membership in the House of Chiefs included all First Class chiefs as well as "not less than 10 Second Class chiefs, selected by their own order."¹² In the House of Assembly, unofficals numbered 20-24, 14-18 of whom were selected by and from the Native Authorities and six of whom could be selected by the Governor.

In the North, traditional rulers were in effect represented twice; first in the House of Chiefs and second as Native Authorities

¹¹Those selected by the Governor were to insure the adequate representation of minorities which might not otherwise have been included.

¹²The Nigerian (Legeslative Council) Order in Council, 1946 (Lagos: Government Printer, 1946). Part 1, (ii).

in the House of Assembly. In the West, though to a lesser extent, the same held true, with the Head Chiefs receiving direct representation in the Assembly. The influence of the traditional rulers at the regional level spilled over into the national level where the Legislative Council was composed of members elected by the regional assemblies.

The nationalist elements reacted strongly to the imposition of the Richards Constitution. They noted that it had been forced upon Nigeria with no prior consultation and the result had been a system which included only the traditional elements of society and the official members of the administration, while providing no role for the nationalist movements. In addition, the nationalists asserted that due to their position in the Colonial Administration, Native Authorities should have been listed as official members of the Houses of Assembly. Thus, the nationalists claimed, Nigeria had no unofficial representation in its entire governmental structure.

The four-year life of the Clifford constitution was dominated by two central themes: First, an ongoing effort to have the constitution broadened to include Nigeria's emerging political parties, and second, an equally persistent effort on the part of Nigeria's leading politicians to consolidate their support. In both cases, traditional rulers played direct roles.

Broadening the Constitution

When a delegation of nationalists went to London in 1947 to request a review of the Clifford Constitution, their requests were denied and they were told to return to Nigeria and to make the best of

what in their minds was a bad situation. However, in April 1948, Lord Milverton, earlier Sir John Clifford, retired as Governor of Nigeria and was replaced by Sir John Macpherson. After just two months in the country, Macpherson announced to the Legislative Council that he had been "greatly encouraged" by the working of the Clifford constitution and therefore thought it was appropriate to make constitutional changes to take effect at the beginning of 1950¹³-- five years before the constitution was scheduled to be reviewed.

The dilemma which Nigeria faced was no longer whether or not to change the constitution, but rather how to change it. This issue was partially settled when the Legislative Council agreed to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Mr. Michael Foot's proposal that popular opinion should be thoroughly canvassed at the village, district, provincial, regional, and national levels. This "canvassing," however, was not to be done directly through elected assemblies, but rather indirectly through a series of hierarchical conferences. At each level, a position was reserved for those officials, primarily traditional rulers, who were closely tied to the existing governmental structure.

The process endorsed by the Legislative Council called first for a series of meetings at the village level. Here, at the "grass-roots" level, every Nigerian was to have the opportunity to express his opinion about the future constitutional development of the country. Actually, these meetings served more as electoral colleges for the conferences which were to follow. After the village meetings took

¹³Ezera, *op. cit.* p. 105.

place, the Village Council,¹⁴ composed of traditional members as well as those appointed by the locally recognized Native Authority, elected representatives who were then sent to the district conferences. The district conference in turn held discussions and sent representatives to the provincial conferences. At the provincial level, the Resident, after consultation with the House of Assembly, the Native Authority, or "any other representative body,"¹⁵ could add members as he saw fit. The Regional conferences included representatives from the provincial conferences as well as all unofficial members of the Houses of Assembly. From here, representatives were sent to the national conference in Ibadan, which also included all the unofficial members of the Legislative Council.¹⁶

The process of selecting representatives for the national conference thus provided traditional rulers with two sources of influence. First, the Village Council, which was the first step in the entire process, was under the direct influence of the local traditional ruler who was serving as the Native Authority. Secondly, the unofficial members of the Houses of Assembly, who were automatically included in the regional conferences, were selected by the Native Authorities, from among their own ranks. It was this group which then selected the Legislative Council. Thus, traditional rulers had the opportunity to influence heavily the composition of the final conference, and in the process, the constitutional arrangements it adopted.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶The general conference also included representatives from Lagos and the Cameroons.

The Macpherson Constitution

In 1951, the Nigeria (Constitution) Order in Council was passed and the "Macpherson" constitution came into effect. The general provisions of the new constitution included a unicameral national House of Representatives which was composed of representatives from the three regional Houses of Assembly. The regional Assemblies were to be elected through an extensive system of electoral colleges. In the West, the election hinged upon twenty-five Electoral Districts, each of which was divided into Intermediate Electoral Districts. These Districts were in turn divided into Primary Electoral Districts. At the Primary level, the franchise was extended to all residents of at least one year who had "paid tax" anywhere in Nigeria.¹⁷ Those elected at the Primary Election were joined by the Native Authorities of the Area at the Intermediate Election. Although there was sometimes a parity between the two groups, the elected members usually outnumbered the traditional members.¹⁸ The Intermediate Electorate then elected from among its own members representatives who were sent to the Final Electoral College. The College then selected, again from among its members, those who would represent the District in the House of Assembly.

In the North, the voter was even further removed from his representative than in the West.¹⁹ Schematically, the system looked something like this:

¹⁷Eme O. Awa. Federal Government in Nigeria (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964). p. 58.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹I use the masculine pronoun here with intent, as women were not enfranchised in the North until the 1979 election.

Primary Electoral Area--- Intermediate Electoral Sub-Area---

Intermediate Electoral Area--- Electoral Area--- Electoral District---
 (Provincial Level)
 House of Assembly.
 (Regional Level)

At each level, an electoral college was held. At the Primary level, tax-paying male residents of at least one year elected representatives. Each succeeding electoral college was then composed of members selected by and from the immediately lower college. In the Final Electoral College, elected members were joined by representatives nominated by the Native Authorities. These representatives could constitute no more than ten per cent of the entire college. The Final College, unlike its Western counterpart, was not bound to elect representatives to the House of Assembly from within its own ranks. Rather, it could choose from anyone who was not otherwise prohibited from standing for election. Thus, people who did not stand for election at the Primary level could be selected as members of the Northern House of Assembly.

The electoral system in the East was far and away the simplest of the three regions. In the East, voters in each "Electoral Unit" elected representatives to an "Electoral Meeting" which then selected from amongst its own ranks the members of the House.

The Macpherson constitution not only allowed traditional rulers substantial influence over the selection of the members of the regional Houses of Assembly, it also gave them direct access to government by creating Houses of Chiefs in the West and in the North. In the North, the House of Chiefs sat jointly with the House of

Assembly in the selection of the members of the national House of Representatives. Indeed, one chief, as well as one member of the Assembly, from each province was guaranteed a position in the national House. In the West, the House of Chiefs elected from among its own ranks three members to the House of Representatives.

In addition to their influence over the selection of the House of Representatives, the Houses of Chiefs also played a role in the regional legislative process. Legislation could be introduced in either House, with the exception of money bills which could be introduced only in the Assembly. However, in order to enact legislation, the assent of both Houses was required as well as the signature of the Lieutenant Governor. If both Houses did not enact similar legislation, then the Lieutenant Governor could call a joint sitting of both Houses-- twenty delegates from each-- which was competent to debate as well as to enact legislation for his signature.²⁰

Traditional rulers in the West and in the North were represented in three ways under the Macpherson constitution. First they were given direct input into the selection of the members of the regional Houses of Assembly-- at the Intermediate Electoral College in the West and at the Final Electoral College in the North. Secondly, regional Houses of Chiefs were established in both regions which influenced, equally with the House of Assembly, the passage of legislation in the

²⁰Nigeria (Constitution) Order in Council, 1951 (London: HMSO, 1951, #1172).

area. Finally, traditional rulers were represented in the selection of members of the national House of Representatives both directly through the participation of the House of Chiefs, as well as indirectly through their influence over the composition of the regional Houses of Assembly.

The Lyttelton Constitution

After only one year of "relative amity and calm," however, the Macpherson constitution broke down under the weight of intense political maneuvering.²¹ Faced with a constitutional crisis in both the Eastern House of Assembly and the national House of Representatives, as well as rioting in Kano. British and Nigerian political leaders met first in London in 1953 and later in Lagos in early 1954 to discuss "defects" in the existing constitution and remedies therefor. Participation in the conferences was based for the first time on political parties. The twenty delegates which Nigeria sent were divided among the parties according to their success in the 1951 election. Hence, in the North, the NPC sponsored five delegates and NEPU one, while in the West the Action Group sent five and the NCNC one. In the East, the NCNC sponsored four and the minority NIP two. Thus, only to the extent that traditional rulers were able to influence the behavior of the parties were they able to influence the outcome of the conferences.

²¹See James S. Coleman. Nigeria: Background to Nationalism (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965) pp. 370-72, and Ezera, op. cit., chapter VIII, "The Breakdown of the Macpherson Constitution," pp. 153-175.

The changes which emerged from the London and Lagos conferences were adopted in the form of the Constitution of 1954, the Lyttelton constitution.²² This constitution was revised once again in 1957, and these final revisions had a profound effect on the constitutional role of traditional rulers in the Nigerian government. By 1957, the constitutional power of the traditional rulers had been greatly reduced both at the center as well as in the regions.

At the federal level, the legislature was divided into two Houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Senate was composed of twelve representatives from each region who were appointed by the governor of that region. In addition, the Governor-General appointed two representatives for Lagos while the chiefs of Lagos elected one. The Oba of Lagos was automatically a member. The House of Representatives, on the other hand, consisted of 320 members who were directly elected. For the first time, the House of Chiefs played no role in the selection of the members of the House of Representatives. Members of the House were not allowed to be members of the Senate, nor were they allowed to be members of any regional legislature. As was noted above, the Oba of Lagos was automatically included in the Senate, and most senior chiefs were included in the regional legislatures. Thus, by virtue of being a chief, and hence a member of another legislative house, traditional leaders were de facto prohibited from entering into elective politics.

²²Lyttelton was the Secretary of State for the Colonies and presided at the conferences.

At the regional level, the legislature remained divided between a House of Chiefs and a House of Assembly. In all three regions, the House of Chiefs consisted of senior chiefs who were automatically members and junior chiefs who were appointed by the Governor of the region. In the Northern Region, all first class chiefs and 95 appointed chiefs made up the bulk of the House, while in the Eastern region, the newly created House of Chiefs consisted of all first class chiefs and 55 chiefs appointed by the Governor.²³ In the Western region, the House of Chiefs included all Head Chiefs and sufficient other chiefs to bring the total to fifty members.

At both the regional and federal levels, the two houses of legislature held similar functions. Either House could introduce legislation which required the approval of the other house. However, the House of Chiefs was no longer of equal competence to the House of Assembly. Both the House of Chiefs and the Senate had the power only to delay money bills by one month and all other legislation by one year. After that time, the House of Representatives or the House of Assembly could override the veto of the Senate or House of Chiefs, respectively.

The exception to the above procedure was in the Northern Region, where the House of Chiefs maintained its equal stature with the House of Assembly. When one House passed a bill and the second did not within six months, then the Governor could invoke Special Procedure. Under the Special Procedure, the President of the House of Chiefs

²³Membership in the Eastern House of Chiefs was based upon a study by G.I. Jones. Report of the Position, Status, and Influence of Chiefs and Natural Rulers in the Eastern Region of Nigeria (Enugu: Eastern Region Government Printer, 1957).

presided over a joint sitting of twenty elected members from both houses. This joint sitting could amend bills as well as enact them.

The cabinet, or Council of Ministers at the federal level and the Executive Council at the regional level, also provided a role for traditional and appointed rulers. In the Council of Ministers, at least one, and not more than two, of the eleven members were to be from the Senate. In the North, not less than two and not more than four of the eleven were to be from the House of Chiefs. However, the Prime Minister was required to be a member of the Assembly. In both the East and the West, the number of Executive Council members from the House of Chiefs depended upon the origin of the Prime Minister. If he was a member of the Assembly, then the East required two representatives from the House of Chiefs on the Executive Council, while the West required three. If the Prime Minister was a member of the House of Chiefs, then these requirements were reduced by one. Regardless of which House the Prime Minister was a member of, he was required to maintain a majority in the House of Assembly.

Under the 1954 constitution, traditional rulers were provided with a formal role through which they could participate in government. However, it was a role greatly reduced from that provided under the Macpherson Constitution. Senior traditional rulers were excluded from standing for election to the House of Assembly or the House of Representatives by virtue of their automatic membership in the House of Chiefs. At the same time, the standing of the House of Chiefs as a legislative body was lowered so that it was no longer equal to the House of Assembly, but rather one whose functions resembled the House of Lords in Great Britain. The one area in which traditional rulers

enhanced their standing was that of the Executive Council where they were specifically included. Under the Lyttelton Constitution, traditional rulers retained a legal position in the governmental structure; however, the position had changed from that of an active and equal role in the formation of policy to a substantially advisory one.

The Independence Constitution 1960

The Lyttelton constitution altered the structures open to traditional rulers first by changing their composition and secondly by adding additional ones. In both the senate and the regional Houses of Chiefs, high ranking traditional rulers such as the Oba of Lagos, first class chiefs, and Head Chiefs were all automatically members, while lesser ranking chiefs were appointed by the Governor. This was also the case under the 1960 constitution; however, all those chiefs who were automatically members became ex officio members. Thus, the senior traditional rulers lost their right to vote in the Senate and Houses of Chiefs, and these houses became controlled by appointed members.

The second constitutional change that independence brought for traditional rulers was the creation of two new governmental bodies which advised the regional governments. In the Northern Region, the Council of Chiefs was set up and was chaired by the Premier of the North. The Council had as its members all ministers who were members of the House of Chiefs as well as additional members of the House of Chiefs who were selected according to the issues which were to be discussed. The jurisdiction of the Council was limited to traditional

affairs; however, its advice was binding upon the government. Thus, with regard to decisions concerning the appointment, recognition, and approval of persons as chiefs, the grading of chiefs, the deposition of chiefs, and the removal of a chief or an ex-chief from the region; the Council of Chiefs, rather than the Governor, determined policy.

The Eastern and Western regions also possessed a new institution in which traditional rulers were allowed to participate, the Minority Councils. The governor could declare any area a minority area which could then set up a Minority Council to advise the government on welfare, development and discrimination within the area. Membership on the Council was extended to all those members of both the House of Assembly and the House of Chiefs whose constituency lay entirely or partly in the minority area. As the Councils were purely advisory, they could publicize issues, however, they were unable to make policy decisions.

With the coming of independence, traditional rulers saw their positions in the federal and regional legislatures erode in favor of appointed chiefs. Only in the North was this situation offset with the creation of the Council of Chiefs which was a policy making body. In both the Eastern and Western regions, the new institutions created, the Minority Councils, further delegated the traditional ruler to an advisory role.

The Republican Constitution 1963

The transfer to republican status under the 1963 constitution altered the position of traditional rulers little, if any at all.

Under this constitution, the British Queen ceased to be Nigeria's Head of State and the responsibilities allocated to the Governor General were transferred to the newly created office of the President. The composition and function of the Senate remained unchanged as did the constitutions of the regions.

One of the few specific references to traditional rulers, or chiefs, came under Chapter XII (Miscellaneous), Section 196 (Prohibition of Certain Legal Proceedings). Sub-section three effectively entrenched to power of the government to grade chiefs by forbidding any court of law from adjudicating a chieftancy dispute. Specifically, the Constitution stated that

No chieftancy question shall be entertained by a court of law in Nigeria, and a certificate which is executed by an authority authorized in that behalf... which states (a) that a particular person is or was... a chief of a specified grade at a specified time or during a specified period; or (b) that the provisions of a law in force in that territory relating to the removal or exclusion of chiefs or former chiefs... have been complied with in the case of a particular person, shall be conclusive evidence as to the matters set out statement.²⁴

At the time of the military coup in 1966, traditional rulers had seen their role erode from that of being the sole members of the House of Representatives, as was the case under the Richards Constitution, to that of being members of a largely advisory body, as was the case under the Lyttleton constitution, as well as the Independence and

²⁴The Constitution of the Federation (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, Print Division, 1963.)

Republican Constitutions. Additionally, traditional rulers had seen the process of their recognition change dramatically, from ultimate dependence upon the British colonial administration to dependence upon Nigeria's elected politicians. As the constitutional role of the traditional rulers narrowed, and the role of political parties expanded, the key question became: What role did traditional rulers play in Nigerian political parties?

B. Traditional Rulers and Political Parties

The West

Electoral politics in early colonial Nigeria were dominated by the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), which, the implications of its name implied, was largely a Lagos based party. The party drew its support primarily from the traditional and "non-Westernized" segments of the Lagosian electorate. From a largely traditional base, it dominated both the Lagos Town Council as well as the Legislative Council elections from 1922 until 1938. In that year the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) won the Town Council elections and returned all three representatives from Lagos to the Legislative Council.

The NYM was formed by several young men at King's College (Lagos) both to oppose colonial educational policy as well as to oppose the conservative politics of the NNDP.²⁵

²⁵Sklar. *op. cit.*, p. 49.

The NYM drew its primary support from the educated and professional elites of Lagos, many of whom were Ibo rather than indigenous Yoruba. The leading figure among the Ibo was Ndamni Azikiwe, who had joined the movement in 1937 and whose newspaper, The West African Pilot, had strongly supported the NYM. In 1941, after an internal power struggle, Azikiwe split from the NYM which left it largely a Yoruba movement. After the split, most of Azikiwe's followers returned to the NNDP.

In 1944, Azikiwe and Herbert Macaulay, founder of the NNDP, presided over one of the first national political meetings in Lagos. The purpose of the meeting was to form a coordinating body which would work with organizations which were politically active in Nigeria. On 26 August, the National Council of Nigeria, and later of the Cameroons (NCNC), was born with the NNDP and a host of other organizations as members-- and with the NYM remaining aloof. Shortly after the imposition of the Richards constitution, the NCNC/NNDP began to campaign heavily for its removal both by traveling widely throughout southern Nigeria and by recapturing the Lagos Town Council and Legislative Council seats.

As the elections to the General Constitutional Conference in Ibadan took place, and as the date of the first national elections under the Macpherson constitution approached, the Nigeiran Youth Movement was virtually moribund while the NCNC was riding a crest. The leadership of the NYM realized this and on 26 march 1950, a group of seven met at the home of Obafemi Awolowo to discuss strategies for capturing the Western Regional government in the upcoming elections. Perhaps the key decision to come out of the meeting was that to

involve the traditional Yoruba cultural organization, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, in any political efforts in the region.²⁶ From its very inception, this new political organization, the Action Group, and Yoruba traditional rulers were to have a very close relationship.

The Egbe Omo Oduduwa, descendants of Oduduwa who was the mythical founder of the Yoruba People, began in London under the leadership of Obafemi Awolowo in 1944. Two years later, it was formally launched in Ife, the "cradle of Yoruba Civilization," and Awolowo was elected Secretary General. The aims of the organization were to unite culturally the various clans within the Yoruba people and to discuss problems which the Yoruba people as a whole faced.²⁷ In so far as Yoruba traditional rulers were concerned, the aims of the Egbe were clear. It sought

to recognize and maintain the monarchical and other similar institutions of Yorubaland, to plan for their complete enlightenment and democratization, to acknowledge the leadership of Yoruba Obas and to establish a firm basis of entire cooperation between the Yoruba people and their Obas in the political, economic, and social affairs of Yorubaland.²⁸

The constitution also stated that the Egbe was determined to study the political problems which the Yoruba faced and "to plan for the rapid development of its political institutions and to accelerate the emergence of a virile modernized efficient Yoruba state."²⁹ To this end, the Egbe maintained a committee on constitutional reform-- of

²⁶Ibid., 102-103.

²⁷Constitution of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, "Aims and Objectives." IN Sklar, op. cit., p. 68.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

which Awolowo was the chairman-- as well as a political committee.³⁰ Although the Egbe advertised itself as a politically neutral organization, it appeared to be the perfect conduit between the Yoruba Obas and the Action Group.

In 1951, the Action Group was formally launched. In its opening press announcement, it stated its pledge to work with the Egbe Omo Oduduwa and to work through the latter's organizational structure in order "to enlarge and consolidate" the Group's sphere of influence.³¹ At the first conference of the Action Group, the executive council of the Egbe met with the leading Yoruba Obas at which time both pledged their support to the A.G. The decision was jointly announced by the spiritual leader of the Yoruba, the Oni of Ife, and the secular leader, the Alafin of Oyo. At the 1951 election neared, Action Group members returned to their home districts, took honorary titles and paid due respect to the local traditional leaders.

The relationship between the A. G. and the traditional rulers was not one of dependence of one upon the other, but rather one of mutual manipulation. Since the beginning of colonial rule in Nigeria, traditional rulers had become increasingly dependent upon the central government for their position. If traditional rulers were to maintain their stature among their people, they had to be able to provide for them and this required influence. As their constitutional position in the government became less and less important, traditional rulers had to look else where to for influence, and inevitably, they turned to powerful political parties.

³⁰Ibid., p. 101.

³¹Ibid., p. 105.

From the perspective of the party, traditional rulers were seen as an asset which the Action Group could not afford to overlook. Awolowo's assessment of the situation was that traditional rulers had an "incalculable sentimental value for the masses in Western and Northern Nigeria" and the practical politics demanded that they be used to support the Action Group.³² This the party attempted both at the regional level, where the power of recognition lay with the governor, as well as at the local level. Here traditional rulers were members of the Local Council which recorded the lines of succession while it also paid the salaries of the traditional rulers. If a given traditional ruler did not cooperate, the Action Group was not adversely disposed to reducing or eliminating his salary or rewriting the succession which could result in his losing his recognition.³³ Thus, traditional rulers were heavily motivated to support the Action Group.

The Action Group utilized this resulting support among traditional rulers in order to dominate Local Councils which appeared to be leaning towards the NCNC. The number of traditional rulers appointed to Local Councils was flexible and the Action Group did not hesitate to load Councils with partisan traditional rulers.³⁴ If a majority could not be obtained in this fashion, then the Council could be investigated on charges of corruption and an interim Council, which was more sympathetic to the Action Group could be appointed.

³²Obafemi Awolowo: The Path To Nigerian Freedom (London: Faber, 1947) p. 66.

³³John P. Mackintosh. Nigerian Government and Politics: Prelude to the Revolution (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966) p. 431-434.

³⁴Ibid.

By actively tying the traditional rulers to the party, their fate would lie with the party and their ability to shift their allegiance to the NCNC would be minimal. Through this process, the politics of including traditional rulers in the Action Group became the primary means by which the latter hoped to control the former.

The North

The first regional political party in the North, the Northern Elements Progressive Association, was founded in 1946. NEPA was supported largely by employees of the Colonial Administration and by the educated elite, many of whom were teachers and taught in government schools. This proved the downfall of the party, as government officials were forbidden to participate in politics and the government did not hesitate to fire or transfer those who participated in organizations of which the government did not approve.³⁵

Shortly after the formation of NEPA, two cultural organizations were founded, the Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa A Yau (the Association of Northern People of Today) in Kaduna, and the Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa (the Northern Peoples Congress) in Zaria. The two later merged and held their first conference as the Northern Peoples Congress in 1949. The Congress stated two primary policy principles: First, the control

³⁵Sklar, op. cit., p. 93.

of the North should remain in the hands of Northerners and second, that the way in which this could best be done was not to topple the existing system, but rather to work within it.³⁶ Its policy towards traditional rulers was somewhat of a paradox, though. On the one hand, the Congress pledged itself to the democratization of the Native Authority system³⁷ while at the same time stating its support for traditional rulers:

The Jam'iyyar (NPC) does not intend to usurp the authority of our Natural rulers; on the contrary, it is our ardent desire to enhance such authority where ever possible. We want to help our Natural rulers in the proper discharge of their duties.³⁸

Within the year, the more radical members of the NPC formed an expressly political party, the Northern Elements Progressive Union, which called for, among other things, the liberation of the "common man" and the "reform of the present autocratic political institutions."³⁹ Shortly after the formation of NEPU, the conservative elements in the NPC severed their mutual ties by prohibiting dual membership in both organizations.

NEPU remained strong, though, and during the initial phase of the 1951 elections its candidates defeated many of its NPC opponents. In order to oppose the emergence of a strong radical NEPU-- one which had close ties with the NCNC in the south⁴⁰-- the NPC reorganized

³⁶Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

³⁷Sklar, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

³⁸Daily Comet, Dec. 29, 1949. IN Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

³⁹NEPU. Declaration of Principles, Swaba Declaration. IN Sklar, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁴⁰The Predecessor of NEPU, NEPA, had canvassed the north alongside Azikiwe in protest of the Richards Constitution. Later, one
(Footnote continued)

itself as a political party and removed all government officials from positions of leadership. On the same day that the NPC announced itself a political party, it welcomed traditional rulers as members and announced that the Sardauna of Sokoto, one of the most senior traditional rulers in the North, had joined the party.

The reasons behind the NPC's embrace of traditional rulers are numerous. First, the NPC drew its primary support from the western educated members of the Fulani aristocracy. These people were often times either related to the traditional rulers or in a position traditionally subservient to them.⁴¹ As the bulk of the elite was employed by the Native Administration, it was financially, as well as socially, dependent upon the good graces of the traditional rulers. Thus, the major power block within the NPC was heavily committed to the maintenance of some semblance of the status quo.

One constant fear of the NPC was that the status quo would be shattered if radical and southern movements gained political control of the North.⁴² This fear was brought to light in 1951 when NEPU-- which in the eyes of the NPC was allied with the NCNC-- began to win elections in the Kano area. The prospect of the enfranchisement of "commoners" did little to settle this fear. In spite of any commitment that the

40(continued)

of the early leaders of NEPA. Sa'adu Zungur, became Secretary General of the NCNC. See Sklar, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

⁴¹Ibid. pp. 323-338.

⁴²Coleman. op. cit. p. 360-366.

members of the NPC had to the reform of Native Authority and to rapid progress towards self-government,⁴³ their overriding goal was to be in control of the process by which these objectives were attained. Here, the desire of the traditional rulers to maintain their position was eminently more acceptable than the prospect of having the opposition in a position where it could threaten the system to which the NPC was so heavily indebted.

As the 1951 elections took place, the NPC in the North and the Action Group in the West had both integrated traditional rulers into their organizations, but for apparently differing reasons. Awolowo did so in an attempt to limit the ability of the traditional rulers to work against his young party, while the NPC did so due to its connection with the Northern aristocracy and its fear of radical and southern domination. In both instances, participation by traditional rulers in political parties increased during a time when their constitutional powers were shrinking. After the votes were tallied, all but a few members of both Northern Houses were affiliated with the

⁴³Whitaker notes that the NPC was committed to both these causes. At the first congress of the NPC, one of its leaders, Tafawa Belawa, introduced a resolution which would have abolished the House of chiefs. C. S. Whitaker. The Politics Of Tradition: Continuity and Change in Northern Nigeria, 1946-1966 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). pp. 57-60.

NPC, while the Action Group won a strong victory in the West. The Sardauna of Sokoto became the leader in the North and Awolowo leader in the West. Joining Awolowo in the Government were the Oba of Benin, and the Oni of Ife, both of whom were Ministers without portfolio.

IV. The Military and the Transition to Civilian Rule

In early 1966, the government headed by Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was forced from power after a military uprising led by Major-General J.T.V. Aguiyi-Ironsi. Two days after the coup, the constitution was suspended and all executive and legislative powers became vested in the Federal Military Government and the Military Governors of the regions. This act, the Constitution (Suspension and Modification) Decree, Decree #1 of 1966, extended the legislative competence of the federal government to the regional level and forbade any court of law from judging the validity of any federal decree.

Throughout the entire period of Military rule, all legislative and executive functions remained vested in the Military. The structure of the government took various forms, from the unitary structure Ironsi introduced to the various federal structures Gowon used. For our purposes, however, the end result of all forms of military rule was the same: traditional rulers, as all other civilians, were excluded from formal participation in the state and national governments. In addition, no governmental actions-- including those concerning traditional rulers-- could be challenged in a court of law.

With the overthrow of the Gowon regime in 1975 by Murtala Muhamed, this situation began to change. On 1 October 1975, three

months after becoming Head of State, Muhamed outlined his program for a return to civilian rule. One of the first steps he outlined was the drafting and ratification of a constitution. To this end, he set up the Constitutional Drafting Committee, which marked the first formal participation of civilians in the governmental process since Ironsi's coup in 1966. The Committee, which was composed of civil servants, academics, lawyers, and former politicians, did recreate a role for civilian participation in government, however, it did not recreate such a role for traditional rulers.

On 7 October 1976, the Drafting Committee presented its draft constitution to the public. The next step in the return to civilian rule was to set up a Constituent Assembly which could debate and ratify the draft constitution. Decree # 50 of 1977 created the Assembly which was to consist of 225 members. The Chairman, Deputy Chairman, and twenty additional members were to be appointed by the Military, while the remaining 203 were to be popularly elected. Section 3, subsection 2 of the decree stated that only those people who were qualified to run for office at the local government level would be qualified to run for election to the Constituent Assembly. As traditional rulers were excluded from running for office at the local level, they were also excluded from sitting in the Assembly. The only exception that was made was for "non-paramount chieftancy titles and offices." The decision as to which positions were paramount and which were non-paramount lay with the Military Governor

of a region. "whose decision (was) final." Thus, although minor chiefs were allowed to participate in the ratification of Nigeria's new constitution, major traditional rulers were excluded. This specific exclusion of traditional rulers both from the selection process for a Constituent Assembly as well as from membership in the Assembly stands in direct contrast to earlier constitutional review processes.

A. The 1979 Constitution

On 28 September 1978, the Constituent Assembly ratified the Draft Constitution, which created the second Federal Republic of Nigeria.⁴⁴ The role prescribed for traditional rulers under this constitution is radically different from that laid out in Nigeria's earlier civilian constitutions. At the Federal level, both houses of the National Assembly are popularly elected. At the regional-- now state-- level, the House of Chiefs no longer exists and the entire unicameral House of Assembly is popularly and directly elected. Where earlier civilian constitutions entrenched the presence of traditional rulers in both the executive as well as the legislative branches of the federal and state governments, the present constitution includes no such provisions. The only formal structures in which traditional rulers are included is the Council of State at the federal level, and the Council of Chiefs at the state level. The Council of State is chaired by the President of the Republic with the Vice President as deputy chairman. Its membership includes, among others, one

⁴⁴cf. The Consitution of the Federation (Lagos: The Federal Military Government of Nigeria, 1979).

representative from the Council of Chiefs from each state.⁴⁵ The primary function of the Council is to advise the President on issues for which their advice is sought.

At the state level, traditional rulers are included as advisors to the Governors through the Council of Chiefs. The Council is empowered to advise the Governor on issues relating to cultural affairs, customary law, and chieftancy affairs. At the request of the Governor, they may also advise him on the maintenance of public order in the state and on other matters.

B. Traditional Rulers and Contemporary Politics in Nigeria⁴⁶

When the ban on politics was lifted in 1978, five political parties emerged, each of which had historical ties to earlier parties and each of which pursued a different policy towards traditional rulers. In the North, the political situation vis-a-vis traditional rulers has not changed dramatically since the early 1960's. On the one hand, the National Party of Nigeria, (NPN) led by Nigeria's President Alhaji Shehu Shagari, has pursued a policy towards traditional rulers which is quite similar to that of the old Northern Peoples Congress. The manifesto of the NPN openly courts the support

⁴⁵Other members include all former heads of state, all former Nigerian Chiefs Justices, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House, and the Attorney General of the Federation.

⁴⁶Much of the following is based upon field work undertaken by the Author during the Summer of 1980. cf. Wm. Cyrus Reed. "Traditional Rulers and Current Politics in Nigeria."

of traditional rulers, who earlier were one of the major bases of NPC support. 47 During the election, the NPN gained the support of many traditional rulers throughout the country. In opposition to the NPN support of traditional rulers, stands the People's Redemption Party (PRP). Led by Amino Kano, the founder of the old Northern Elements Progressive Union, the PRP has pursued a policy similar to that of its forerunner by openly opposing the very institution of traditional rule. The party manifesto pledges the party to the "liberation of all Nigerians from feudal shackles."48 In addition, the only PRP elected governor, the late Mohamed Abubakar Rimi of Kano, called for the abolition of traditional rule because the rulers were corrupt, tyrannical, and "slept in the sweat of the common man."49 The other three parties did not mention traditional rulers in their respective manifestoes, however, both the Greater Nigeria People's Party (GNPP) and the United Party of Nigeria (UPN) have included traditional rulers in their political strategies. In Borno, the only fully GNPP controlled state, traditional rulers have been suspected of maintaining close ties with the NPN, which has a considerable following in the state. Several traditional rulers have had their

47The Manifesto of the National Party of Nigeria, Section XIV Traditional Institutions and Leaders, states that "The Party holds dear the role traditional rulers have hitherto played as instruments of stability in the maintenance of law and order in the history of this great nation. It is the view of the party that this role must be allowed to continue. The party will therefore if and when elected into power, take immediate action to (i) guarantee them befitting functions and remunerations and (ii) ensure their participation through consultation in accordance with the constitution. IN Nigeria Yearbook (Lagos: The Daily Times, 1980).

48The Manifesto of the Peoples Redemption Party, Section "True Democracy." IN Ibid.

49 Wm. Cyrus Reed. "Traditional Rulers and Contemporary Politics in Nigeria."

titles removed by the GNPP and the reaction of the NPN has been violent. In June 1980, 14 NPN supporters lost their lives in a riot which followed the deposition of a single traditional ruler.

The UPN has also faced opposition in the form of traditional rulers supporting the NPN. The UPN, headed by Obafemi Awolowo, has reacted in a way not dissimilar to that of Awolowo's earlier party, the Action Group. In an effort to bring traditional rulers back into the fold of the UPN, or at least out from under the sway of the NPN, Awolowo has sought to depose certain unruly minor traditional rulers, largely on trumped up charges.⁵⁰ However, this strategy may meet with less success than it did earlier. Under the 1979 constitution, courts of law are no longer forbidden to hear cases involving traditional rulers and several have already filed cases against the UPN and have met with initial success.⁵¹

V. Conclusion

The 1979 constitution and the process leading up to it, excluded traditional rulers from any major constitutional or legal role in the Nigerian government. By doing so, the military sought to exclude traditional rulers from participating in partisan politics. By disqualifying them from any elected position at the local level, traditional rulers were also disqualified from all governmental

⁵⁰One was accused of being a disco fan, another of using juju against the UPN, and another of having been disloyal to a superior traditional ruler. cf Reed. Ibid.

⁵¹As of August 1980, all of those cases mentioned above had gone to court. The alleged disco fan had had his salary reinstated; the others have lost their cases, but they have appealed. Reed. op. cit.

positions, including those in the cabinet. In addition, the introduction of judicial review of the legislature means that traditional rulers will no longer be entirely dependent upon the good graces of Nigeira's elected leaders.

Why then, with all of this potential neutrality and all the apparent lack of power, are political parties interested in which side of the political fence traditional rulers sit? Part of the answer can perhaps be gleaned from our examination of pre-1966 politics. During that period, as the constitutional channels for the participation of traditional rulers, the opportunities for participation in the parties expanded. Today, the constitutional structures provided for traditional rulers are small indeed, and are purely advisory. Thus, if past patterns of behavior are any guide, traditional rulers will continue to seek a role in political parties. They will seek participation in government through intermediary organization, as few or very weak. structures permit their direct participation.

Will the parties provide this role? Preliminary indications are that at least the NPN will. Other parties are sufficiently concerned about this to have begun attacks upon those traditional rulers who side with the NPN. This concern would indicate that most parties in Nigeria feel today as Awolowo and the Action Group did nearly three decades ago, that traditional rulers are an incalculable factor in Nigerian party politics. The key question now is: What is the utility to the party of the support of the traditional rulers? Do traditional rulers still command the respect of their "subjects" and if so, to what extent does this respect translate into influence over their political behavior? The question which Nigerian political

parties face today is not whether traditional rulers can be brought into current politics, nor is it how this should be done. Rather, the primary question is: Is it worth it to the party? The answer to this question will require detailed analysis of the influence of individual traditional rulers in their home areas.

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